The Somali Short-billed Crombec *Sylvietta philippae* in Somalia and Ethiopia

by J. S. Ash

Received 16 October 1981

The Somali Short-billed Crombec *Sylvietta philippae* is a little known bird, which previously has only twice been reported in the field as a distinct species; first by Sir Geoffrey Archer, who thought it was a new *Eremomela* when he first collected it in 1918. Though, at that time, "It was described by someone in the British Museum as a new species" (Archer & Godman 1961: 1259–61), "the description was *never published*" (Archer's italics). Much later, Williams (1955) found it again independently and described it as a new *Sylvietta*. Other specimens have since been found in collections and have been reported upon (Erard 1974, Roche 1966, 1975, 1977). The species is now known to be fairly widespread in Somalia (pers. obs.), and it occurs in the adjoining area of Ethiopia (Erard 1974 and pers. obs.); but it lives in country seldom visited by ornithologists, so that it will be a long time before its range is finally determined.

Hall & Moreau (1970) regarded the 3 short-billed *Sylvietta* (*whytii, brachyura* and *philippae*) as a superspecies, distinct from both the long-billed species, *rufescens* and *isabellina,* which form another superspecies. A further 4 forest and woodland species, *ruficapilla, leucophrys, virens* and *denti* form a second species-group. Irwin (1968), however, regards *ruficapilla* and *whytii* as forming a superspecies.

Identification

Adequate descriptions of *S. philippae* have been given by Williams (1955), Archer & Godman (1961) and Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960). My own impression is that the difficulties of identification have been overemphasised (but I had the advantage of knowing what to expect), and this impression needs affirming, for the species presents no particular problems of recognition in the field. It is clearly an *Eremomela* or *Sylvietta,* and no species in these genera other than *S. philippae* shows the combination of yellow on the underparts, reddish-brown legs, dark face mask and white supercilium. At first glance the species is reminiscent of a diminutive Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* from its face mask; *S. curruca,* however, is unknown within the range of *S. philippae.*

Distribution

All records of *S. philippae* that I have been able to trace are detailed in Table 1, and their distribution is shown in Figure 1. It occurs in northern and western Somalia (not in the northeast, *pace* Hall & Moreau 1970), and just extends into the Ogaden (Ethiopia). It may be expected more widely in the Ogaden when further exploration becomes possible (travel in this area has always been hazardous, and is now virtually impossible).

S. brachyura has a much wider distribution, extending right across northern Somalia, south through the central Ogaden and across southern Somalia. However, except in the small area of the upper Juba, in Somalia, nowhere else so far as is known do the 2 species overlap. On the other hand, *S. isabellina* extends in a broad belt through the west of northern Somalia

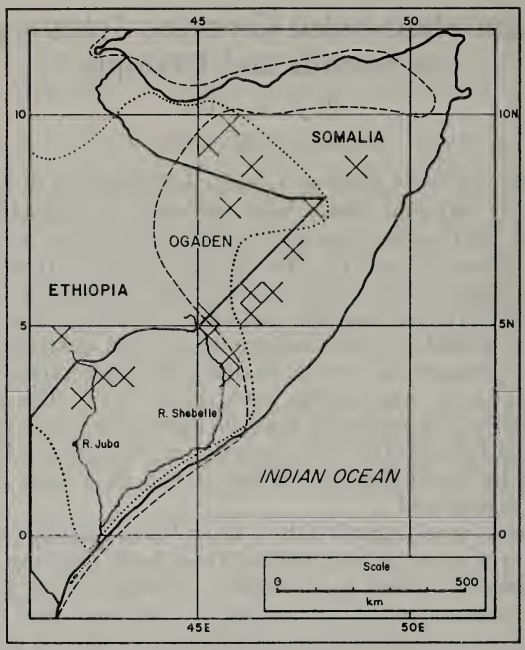

Fig. 1. Distribution of *Sylvietta philippae* in Somalia and Ethiopia in relation to that of *S. brachyura* and *S. isabellina*. The distribution of *S. brachyura* lies to the west of the broken line, of *S. isabellina* to the west of the dotted line, and *S. philippae* records are shown by half-degree squares marked with a X. Map based on Somalia Distribution Scheme (*vide* Ash & Pomeroy 1981).

TABLE 1

All known records of *Sylvietta philippae* in Somalia and Ethiopia

No.	Locality	Coordinates		Dates	Wing (mm)	Wt. (g)	Authority
1.	Burao	09°32′N, 45°33′E	1♂	—.ii.18	—	—	Archer & Godman 1961
2.	Eil Huma	09°23′N, 45°10′E	1	—.—.18	—	—	Archer & Godman 1961
3.	Daba Dalol	08°57′N, 46°21′E	1♀	—.ii.18	54.5	—	Archer & Godman 1961
4.	Garrero	08°54′N, 46°10′E	1	—.—.18	—	—	Archer & Godman 1961
5.	Nr. Galkayu	06°50′N, 47°25′E	1♂	8.iii.54	52,55.5 (2♂♂)	—	Williams 1955
6.	Nr. Dusa Mareb	05°32′N, 46°23′E	—	—.—.54	51–53 (4♀♀)	—	Williams 1955
7.	Nr. Belet Uen	04°50′N, 45°20′E	—	—.—.54		—	Williams 1955
8.	Iesomme	04°03′N, 45°39′E	1♂	2.ix.62	54.5	—	Roche 1975*
9.	Run	08°48′N, 48°52′E	1♀	6.viii.64	—	—	Roche 1975
10.	Run	08°48′N, 48°52′E	1♂,1o	12.viii.69	—	—	Roche 1977
11.	Bogol Mayo (11km ESE)	04°30′N, 41°35′E	1♂	24.xi.71	55.5	10	Erard 1974
			1♀	24.xi.71	52.5	9	Erard 1974
12.	Gheraro	07°50′N, 45°54′E	1	12.vii.76	—	—	Ash
13.	Gheraro (10km SW)	07°47′N, 45°51′E	2	12.vii.76	—	—	Ash
14.	Mataban	05°10′N, 45°27′E	Pr.	29.iv.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
15.	El Dere (15km W)	05°20′N, 46°03′E	2	29.iv.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
16.	Dusa Mareb (6km SW)	05°28′N, 46°21′E	3	29.iv.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
17.	Lake Sinadogo (5km N)	05°24′N, 46°22′E	1	29.iv.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
18.	Maregur (5km NE)	05°47′N, 46°33′E	1♂	30.iv.79	53	7.4	Ash & Miskell
			1♀	30.iv.79	50	7.9	Ash & Miskell
19.	Galkayu (10km NE)	06°51′N, 47°25′E	1♂s	1.v.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
20.	Bur Dinle (17km NE)	07°44′N, 47°56′E	1	1.v.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
21.	Bulo Burti (9km N)	03°57′N, 45°36′E	Pr.B	25.v.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
22.	Garba Harray (38km S)	03°01′N, 42°17′E	2	5.x.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
23.	Lugh (43km SW)	03°31′N, 42°19′E	2	7.x.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
24.	Wajit (19km W)	03°50′N, 43°04′E	4	7.x.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
25.	Wajit (26km S)	03°30′N, 43°14′E	1	7.x.79	—	—	Ash & Miskell
26.	Garoe (101km S)	08°24′N, 48°29′E	1♂s	15.v.80	—	—	Ash & Miskell
27.	El Dere (3km NE)	05°22′N, 46°12′E	1	16.v.80	—	—	Ash & Miskell

Notes: *recorded as *Eremomela icteropygialis* in Roche (1966); Pr. = pair; B = breeding; s = singing; numbers 12–17 and 19–27 are sight records; numbers 11–13 are in Ethiopia, the others in Somalia; o = unsexed.

southwards through the Ogaden and southern Somalia west of 48°E, and is widely sympatric with both *brachyura* and *philippae,* and in the upper Juba all 3 species occur together. Further information may reveal less allopatry between *philippae* and *brachyura;* Hall & Moreau (1970), for example, with much fewer data for the 3 species, show *philippae* distribution to be isolated from both the other species.

Breeding

The nest and eggs of *S. philippae* are still unknown. It is not apparent whether the comment in Archer & Godman (1961) that "eggs would be laid in May" is based on gonadal development, or is a surmise based on experience with other species; but it nevertheless proves accurate. The pair (No. 18 in Table. 1) examined on 30 April showed fully developed gonads in the male (7mm) and partial development in the female (largest ovum 1mm), indicating that eggs would be laid before mid-May. A pair (No. 21) on 25 May were feeding a newly fledged young bird, so that egg-laying must have been about 1 May. Williams (1955) also estimated from the gonadal development of his 6 specimens that the breeding season started in early May.

Song and calls

Song heard at the end of April and in early May is an oft-repeated sequence of 3 phrases, which I rendered as "ti-churr-cheesis", of which the middle one was ascending, but the last more subdued. Apparently agitated birds under observation had 2 calls (alarm?), one a "churr" as in the song, and another a loud metallic "tchink", clearly audible at 30m.

Other observations

More information is required on *S. philippae*'s ecological requirements. I can confirm the observations of Williams (1955) and Erard (1974) that it is particularly associated with rocky ground or red sandy soils, but I cannot be certain that this is always the case. Although 1–3 birds may often be seen together on their own, *philippae* is also a member of the mixed bird parties so characteristic of "thorn-bush" country. My observations with J. E. Miskell, extending over a few days only, suggest that the species is fairly common and widespread, and there are no grounds for including it in the "on the fringe of inclusion" category in the African Bird Red Data Book as is proposed (N. Collar *in litt,* 8.ix.81).

Males are larger than females. The wing-lengths of 5 males are 52–55.5mm (mean: 54.1) compared with 50–54.5mm (mean: 52.1) for 7 females. The only weights are: 2♂♂, 7.4 and 10g; 2♀♀, 7.9 and 9g.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Kathy Pruitt who kindly sent copies of papers to me in the field; to J. E. Miskell who contributed towards the observations in 1979 and 1980; to Nancy Gunkelman for drawing the distribution map, and to Dr. J. F. Monk for editorial help.

References:

Archer, G. & Godman, E. M. 1961. *The Birds of British Somaliland and the Gulf of Aden.* Vol. 4. Oliver & Boyd: Edinburgh & London.

Ash, J. S. & Pomeroy, D. E. 1981. Mapping schemes in the Afrotropical Region. *Scopus* 5: 36–38.

Erard, C. 1974. Notes faunistiques et systématiques sur quelques oiseaux d'Ethiopie. *Bonn. Zool. Beitr.* 25: 76–86.

Hall, B. P. & Moreau, R. E. 1970. *An Atlas of Speciation in African Passerine Birds.* Trustees of the Brit. Mus. (Nat. Hist.): London.

Irwin, M. P. S. 1968. The relationship of the Crombecs *Sylvietta ruficapilla* Bocage and *Sylvietta whytii* Shelley. *Bonn. Zool. Beitr.* 19: 249–256.
Mackworth-Praed, C. W. & Grant, C. H. B. 1960. *Birds of Eastern and North-eastern Africa.* Longmans: London.
Roche, J. 1966. Recherches écologiques et systématiques sur les oiseaux de la République de Somalie (partie ex-italienne). *Monit. Zool. Ital.* 74, suppl: 44–79.
— 1975. Recherches ornithologiques en République de Somalie. Résultats de la mission de 1964. *Monit. Zool. Ital.* N.S. Suppl. 6: 103–140.
— 1977. Recherches ornithologiques en République de Somalie. Résultats des missions italiennes de 1968 et 1969. *Monit. Zool. Ital.* N.S. Suppl. 9: 201–231.
Williams, J. G. 1955. A new species of *Sylvietta* from Italian Somaliland. *Ibis* 97: 582–583.

Address: Dr. J. S. Ash, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560, U.S.A.

© British Ornithologists' Club 1982.

Plumage "atavism" in a Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

by M. Gochfeld, P. A. Buckley, Francine G. Buckley

Received 17 October 1981

Herons with abnormally white plumage have seldom been reported, probably because white species, age-classes or colour morphs normally occur in many genera of the Ardeidae (see particularly for detailed discussion Berlioz 1949 and Hancock & Elliott 1978). On 12 June 1978, during a helicopter survey-census of colonially breeding waterbirds on Long Island, New York (Buckley & Buckley 1980), we flushed a whitish heron with a group of Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* in a heronry on Gardiner's Island, Suffolk County, New York. Following up our initial impression of a ghostly cream-white night heron, we were surprised to see a bird whose white primaries stood out in contrast to the pale beige mantle and upper wing coverts with fine olive shaft streaking, a character combination immediately calling to mind the Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides,* a Eurafrican species which has not been reported in the Western Hemisphere. The bird, however, seemed to have the blackish crown of a night heron. We landed and explored the colony on foot and P.A.B. was able to obtain a sufficiently good view to ascertain that the bird had a black crown, yellow-green legs, red eyes, and a stout blackish bill, all characteristics of an adult Black-crowned Night Heron. Only the very pale back colour was abnormal for this species.

The presence of normally coloured soft parts and crown suggests that leucism, one possible explanation, might not be the proper one. It is more likely that this individual was exhibiting a melanic schizochroism (loss of one of the 2–3 melanins normally occurring in its plumage). Although such schizochroic birds are often mistakenly referred to as leucistic, "partial albinos" (a contradiction in terms since albinism is an all-or-none phenomenon), or dilute individuals, these terms all represent separate genetic manifestations (see Buckley (1982) for distinctions among them).

The body-wide loss of melanin pigmentation in all but the crown, with normal carotinoid pigmentation, is more consistent with melanic schizochroism than with leucism. Which specific melanin might be involved is